



## **Fio Partners, LLC**

### A Deeper Dive: Understanding and Assessing Culture and Climate

#### DEFINING CULTURE AND CLIMATE

An organization is a group of *people* structured to achieve a common purpose. Over time, the norms—or the spoken and unspoken expectations—that guide behaviors evolve and become a powerful influence on employee performance. Collectively, these norms form an organization’s culture.

As management guru Peter Drucker famously asserted, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Culture can be thought of as the organization’s personality. Once established, it can be very difficult to change, even if leadership changes—That’s why senior management must consistently work to ensure that culture is aligned with and supportive of the organization’s work.

#### FIO’S ASSESSMENT PROCESS TO UNDERSTAND CULTURE

##### CLIMATE SURVEY

Our Climate Survey assesses both the effectiveness of unit supervision and the staff’s perception of the entire organization. This tool gathers information about such topics as the quality and timeliness of decision making, the availability of information for decision making, the clarity of authority and responsibility, the clarity of job descriptions, realism of performance objectives, and fairness and equity. The survey also asks staff to provide input on culture type. This can be an early indicator that the work being done, the management style used, and the established culture have slipped out of alignment.

##### CULTURE MAPPING

The process of culture mapping recognizes that there can be more than one culture operating and more than one type of work underway in organizations. It is often the case that organizations develop a single overarching culture, but it is not unusual for subunits within the larger entity to evolve cultures of their own as well. It is also sometimes the case that the overarching culture is healthier than the subunit culture or a poor match with some of the work that is being done. An example might be a unit within an organization with the expectation that they will do highly innovative and experimental work. If the culture is one of high compliance and a low tolerance for error, creativity and innovation will suffer.

Our work in this area requires a lot of teaching as we make sure that both management and employees take in the important concepts about what culture is, how it works, its relationship to what management does, or does not do, and the destructive effects of a mismatch.

Our climate survey will be the first likely indicator of a significant culture mix issue. Following the climate survey, culture mapping begins with interviews with departmental management. Focus groups are held with work units, taking care to structure the units so that no one's direct report is in the same group with the supervisor. We also distribute a more in-depth tool that looks at both the nature of the culture and the nature of the work done by the work unit. The same tool assesses how knowledge is acquired, what skills are critical to their roles, and what type of teamwork they are engaged in.

The focus group results build understanding of the context for the culture mismatch and help identify how these challenges emerged. From the focus groups, we identify a set of specific contributing factors that appear to underlie the issues. In feeding back the results, Fio shows how the problem set has emerged as the organization has evolved, identifying critical decision points where choices created underlying conflicts.

Culture mapping is part of establishing the antecedents for change, including creating awareness of key problems and the behaviors that contribute to them. Once identified, we raise the consciousness of possible causes, contributing factors, and the pervasiveness of specific problem areas. We work to determine if these are issues of will, a lack of skill or knowledge, or response to environmental stimulus, such as management actions that are poorly framed. This deeper understanding is necessary as these gaps, if not addressed, will impede solutions. As a deeper understanding of the source of problems becomes clear, we test for the willingness within the leadership to continue the process of resetting norms in a way that appropriately supports the work at hand.

## NORMS RESET

An organizational norm is the expected behavior of a group of employees as it conducts its work. Norms, collectively, are the cultural rules of behavior which are typically negotiated both formally and informally between employees and employers, but also among all employees who work together routinely.

In our experience, organizations can become dysfunctional when norms settle into a place that is not really in the best interest of the organization and its work. Two major causes typically contribute to unproductive norms: significant organizational stress or change that was not thought through. Often, there is no consensus on what the norm is either, leading to inconsistent practice across departments or work units, feelings of dis-equity, and inter-unit conflict. Inconsistent practices occur most often because the inconsistencies are not openly identified and worked through.

Inspired by the formative work of Anthony Pearson, we follow a synergical model for helping organizations develop healthy internal norms. Our tool helps organizations and departments to reset norms that have somehow "landed in the wrong place" over time. It is used to help the group structure discussions safely and come to consensus about what the best answer is. There is no right answer, only one that the group believes will best serve the organization and its desired impact.

## ABOUT FIO PARTNERS, LLC

[Fio Partners](#) helps leaders make better decisions. Through consulting and research, we work with our clients to create information-rich processes that promote shared understanding and direction.

Jane Arsenault and Anne Yurasek founded Fio Partners in 2007. The firm has served more than 500 foundations, nonprofit organizations, libraries, social enterprises, and government entities. Our services include strategic planning, strategic alliances and corporate restructuring, business planning, evaluation and research, and leadership and management training.